**Upper Darby School Budget Forum**

 **Moderator Report**

**Group #4**

**Beverly Hills Middle School- 3.5.13**

**Moderators: Germaine Ingram and Ellen Petersen**

Group 4 of this forum had between 18 and 20 people present throughout the session.  Fifteen of the 20 were women; 6 appeared to be ethnic minorities; 2 high school students; 2 Penn graduate students; 1 translator, who also participated as an interested citizen.  In brief opening introductions, the participants identified almost a dozen ways that they are connected to the school budget issues: Teacher (5 people identified themselves this way----one has taught for 35 years in the district); Parent (11 people said that they have one or more children in the UD schools); Resident; Pastor of a local church with a congregational interest in public education; member of the “Arts & Education Board”; Concerned taxpayer; Grandparent of a student in the district; Spouse of a teacher; Student in the district; Public Education Advocate; Graduate Student. This was an amiable, cooperative group.  They did a good job of listening to one another and responding to one another’s thoughts and concerns.  One person came into the session stating that she had already carefully analyzed the worksheet.  While she tended to be vocal during the session, she was attentive to listening to others and proposed ways to capture the sentiments of the group, such as treating an action as “shared pain” rather than “no way/no how”.   They did not get hung up on pet peeves, like nepotism or the failure of the state to do its share; they stayed focused on the actions contained on the worksheet.

After the introductions, we quickly organized the group into 4 sub-groups to focus on a portion of the worksheet.  Sub-group 1 worked on actions 1-9 (Instruction); Sub-group 2 worked on actions 10-19 (Instruction and Support Services); Sub-group 3 looked at actions 22-31 (Support Services (Non-instructional) and Community Services); and Sub-group 4 worked on actions 32-37 (Student Activities and Revenue Actions).  We instructed them to take a few minutes to peruse the entire worksheet, then as a sub-group discuss whether there are any actions that they would propose as “low-hanging fruit” or “no way/no how” to the plenary group.  We initially gave them about 25 minutes to complete their small group discussion; then realizing that we did not want the participants to exhaust themselves in discussion in the small groups, we shortened the time period to 18-20 minutes.  Each of the sub-groups was active in discussing the actions they were assigned----some sub-groups were more lively than others.  Some questions arose, such as what’s the average daycare charge (so that they can assess whether the dollar increase of a 7% hike in fees would be tolerable for most families); and about which actions are progressive (such as #9) and which are additive (such as #14).   When we asked, they readily moved their chairs into a circle for plenary discussion.

**Low-Hanging Fruit**

The group registered a strong consensus that there were no true “low-hanging fruit” on the worksheet----that every proposed action would have a negative consequence on the ability to serve children and families.

With that caveat, they plunged into considering what actions might constitute “low-hanging fruit” within the context of this exercise.

* 11b: 3/4 of the group supported reducing elementary building/office support from 24 to 16.  The rationale expressed was that they wanted to be “student-centered” in their choices, and that this cut would be less likely than others to affect student learning.  Still, there was a comment, “this isn’t easy----nothing is easy.”
* 22: 3/4 of the group supported reducing secretarial support for the Office of the Superintendent.  The rationale was that there are no children directly served in that office.  There were questions about how this cut would be accomplished----whether it would be by putting people on part-time or reducing hours.  One person asked why there isn’t room for deeper cuts here.
* 23:  There was almost unanimous support for reducing secretarial support for the Office of the Principal.  There were questions about how this might be accomplished.  The rationale was that as between secretarial staff and teachers, saving teachers wins hands-down.
* 28b:   3/4 of the group supported eliminating high school transportation.  The person who proposed this cut as low-hanging fruit started her comment by acknowledging that this would be controversial.  What seemed to be driving this vote was people’s frustration with the amount of money being spent bussing private school students long distances, often into other counties.  They were willing to eliminate all secondary school bussing if that’s what it takes to drop bussing of private school students.  One participant, who identified herself as the parent of private school students, said that she agreed with the view that the money would be better spent on “supporting sustainable education”.
* 35.  A bare ¾ of the group supported raising taxes by an average of $197/taxpayer (35c).  When we put 35b to a vote----raising taxes for the average taxpayer by $130----there was almost unanimous support.  People think that a tax hike is inevitable, and $197/taxpayer is a manageable amount.  However, participants commented on resistance to a tax hike likely to come from seniors and others who say that they don’t have kids in school and don’t want their taxes raised to support schools that they don’t feel are doing a good job of educating.  These people might be more inclined to support a tax hike for sanitation, police and fire, and other non-education functions.

**No Way/No How**

The group identified no single action that they considered unthinkable.  However, they registered strongly a general value judgment that actions that raise class size or affect resources in the classroom should be a last resort.

The group considered the three actions related to eliminating lead teachers (##2,5,8).  Although none of the three actions received sufficient votes to qualify as a “no way/no how” choice, there was rich discussion about the pros and cons of eliminating or reducing lead teachers at each grade organization level.  At the elementary level, one participant said “the lead teacher is essential in my school.”  Other comments were that the principal can’t do what the lead teacher does, nor can the social worker.  The lead teacher is necessary to deal with problem situations.  However, people noted that not all schools have lead teachers, therefore questioning their necessity.  There were only seven votes out of 19 to make this action “no way/no how”.

More people (12) were convinced that lead teachers are essential in middle schools, but not enough to make this action “no way/no how”.  Comments were that you need lead teachers in the middle school grades, where behavior issues are more challenging; student behavior in the middle years impacts all students; “middle school is challenging---there are more incidents to deal with”; “middle schools in this district are a mess”; lead teachers are more accessible than the principal; they are an important support for teachers; lead teachers have more agency than a social worker----lead teachers can make things happen that a social worker can’t.  Despite these sentiments, there was not sufficient support for protecting this position from elimination at middle schools; but no one suggested that this is a place where the school board might look to make savings.

In considering reduction of lead teachers at the high school level, the group declined to put this action off-limits for cuts.  Some said that you can give lead teachers’ responsibilities to school counselors (even though each high school counselor currently handles an average of 450 students).  One student participant said that lead teachers are more important for 9th and 10th graders than for 11th and 12th graders.  Another student talked about how the lead teacher at her school is a valued support for the good students.  An adult participant cautioned the student to consider the responsibilities of the role rather than the performance of a particular lead teacher. Upon recommendation of one of the participants, the action was considered in the “shared pain” category.   In this vote, half of the participants agreed that lead teachers should be reduced at the high school level.

**Shared Pain**

As stated above, half of the participants agreed to action #8 (Reduce Lead Teachers by 2---no lead teacher in Jr. and Sr. years) in the category of “shared pain”.

In the closing minutes of the session, half (9 of 18) participants agreed to use $2M of the fund balance to reduce the deficit.  This vote overcame reminders that the fund balance is already 2-5% below the recommended level and that the action could make it more costly for the district to borrow.  Some participants said that if additional revenues come in, the fund balance can be replenished (suggesting that it is better to take the risk that the fund balance will remain underfunded than to take more out of education infrastructure).

**Final Point Count – 87 POINTS**

The final point count was 87---55 of which came from a tax hike, and 21 of which came from using $2M from the fund balance.